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Relative Story-Truth: A Eulogy

The Things They Carried, a metafictional novel by Tim O'Brien, holds that truth is relative because language inherently distorts and reshapes truth as the perceiver sees fit. For O'Brien, language can resurrect the dead and make them as vivacious as living people. Language can recount miracles that never occurred, grant fame and glory to people who never existed, and claim that the world has been engaged in continuous warfare since the dawn of civilization—all to express the storyteller's reality. Ever since the death of my paternal grandmother, I, like O'Brien, have steadfastly believed that language is not and cannot represent objective truth. The goal of language, then, is not to record how time and space unfold, but to capture universal emotions.

As O'Brien describes it, the truth of how any event transpired can be explained through two different interpretations: happening-truth and story-truth. Happening-truth is the factual representation of how the event occurred, and seeks to objectively portray an event's significance by accentuating the event's causes and effects. Happening separates the event from the emotions of the people it affected, and thus is cold and indifferent in its analysis. Story-truth, however, delves deeper than happening-truth. It emphasizes the very emotions happening-truth seeks to eliminate, and makes the event understandable for all humans by capturing the event's emotional importance. Story-truth brings the characters to life and gives them personalities, thoughts, and memories. And while story-truth is not as scientific as happening-truth, it does convey a far more potent and relatable message.

Until five years ago, I believed that happening-truth was the only type of accurate truth. But one day in the summer of 2005, my family and I were on the beach in Florida when we received the news: my paternal grandmother, who had suffered from dementia and brain cancer for over half a decade, had died that morning in Israel. I never had the opportunity to know my grandmother, as for most of my life she was either in hospitals receiving treatment or at her house in Haifa recovering from them. My father, however, was devastated by the news; he staggered and almost fell to the ground. My mother rushed to his side and hugged him to keep him from collapsing physically and emotionally. He cried in my mother's arms for what felt like forever. Once my father could not shed any more tears, my brother took my hand and led me into the family embrace.

I stood there, dazed and shaking with my heart-torn family. I wondered why my father, my life's source of strength, stability, and serenity, had nearly instantaneously and completely broken down. My eleven-year-old brain simply didn't understand the significance of what had occurred. Another person on this earth had died due to a disease. The only difference was that the person, by pure chance, was related to me. The fact of death itself was not special. Why did it matter so much?

Unable to remove the thought of my grandmother's death from their minds, my parents cut our vacation short and we returned home. Once we had arrived, unpacked, and my father had left for the funeral in Israel, my mother, always worrying about my writing abilities, instructed me to write in my journal in my room. Grudgingly, I sat down at my desk, opened a new notebook, and stared at the page, hoping that an idea to write about would burst forth from it. Despite my best efforts, none came. I turned my thoughts to my father and remembered why he was in Israel. Wondering about the type of person my grandmother had been, I decided to

compose an adventure story about her. She would be a mighty jungle warrior who defended her children from the lions, tigers, and bears of the Amazon rain forest. Satisfied with the idea, I began to scribble.

At first, the stories were simple and resembled childish fantasies. As time passed and my imagination grew, however, the stories became increasingly complex. I wrote for months about seemingly impossible adventures my grandmother had overcome throughout her life. She was an astronaut who had traveled into black holes and lived to tell the tale, a member of an elite Israeli spy team that had uncovered the Iranian plot to destroy Israel, and an assassin who had liberated concentration camps from the Germans during WWII. My grandmother had the power to invade people's dreams and singlehandedly engineered the atomic bomb. Although her most arduous challenge was the eradication of world hunger, she simply utilized her IQ of 2046 to conceive a tasty solution: the mass production of chocolate cake.

And then, one year after I began writing about my grandmother, I realized that the stories were no longer fantasies. I honestly believed my grandmother to be an invincible, mighty woman capable of simultaneously fighting four saber-tooth lions and cooking four-course meals. Although my father had attended my grandmother's funeral, she was not locked in a coffin underneath the earth; she was in Haifa, awaiting my family to visit her so she wouldn't be alone during her next hospital visit. She was happy, complaining about Israeli politics, listening to my childish complaints and helping me resolve my problems. The fact was not that my grandmother was not dead; it was that she was not dead to me. She was my hero. She was my role model. She was alive in every sense but the physical.

My stories of my grandmother are now my memories of her. They are true memories that have undoubtedly happened. Yes, my grandmother is dead and buried in Israel. But she is also

alive, brimming with youth and vigor, ready to take on the next challenge I conceive and write about. Like O'Brien, "I can steal her soul and revive [it]" (236). Through my stories, "miracles can happen. [She] can smile and stand up," make me a cup of hot chocolate, and ask me what I am studying in English class (236). I love my grandmother dearly, much like any grandson would. My experience is unique, but the emotions I felt—admiration, adoration, happiness, pride—are universal. It is through story-truth that I can acknowledge my reality, in which my grandmother is alive in a spiritual form and provides me with solace and comfort in my dreams. How can I believe exclusively in the happening-truth of my grandmother's death? To do so is to ignore the relative story-truth I created through my writing to keep my grandmother alive. I would be forced to renounce every memory of her as false, every story as blasphemy, every ounce of love for the person she is to me as heresy. And that simply is not true.